

PROFILES IN FAITH

Major Warren Hamilton Lewis 1895–1973

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Major Warren Hamilton Lewis was a kind-hearted and genuinely humble man, who spent most of his years living a quiet and retiring life. Were it not for his own extensive diary kept over the span of five decades, we would know very little of this reserved gentleman, who in later years grew to prefer the company of a good book to even the most congenial of social gatherings. Like most people, his life was filled with times of genuine happiness as well as moments of great sorrow. But unlike anyone else, he was C.S. Lewis's brother.

Loving Brother

Though there is no doubt that his name is best-remembered today because he was C.S. Lewis's brother, Warren would have willingly embraced such a designation—and not chafed under it. For in spite of the fact that he was the elder by three years, Warren never evidenced resentment at being overshadowed by his highly visible and successful younger brother. Indeed, if anything he welcomed it, for Warren and his brother (known to him as Jack) were from their earliest days the closest of friends. As Warren himself described their relationship:

I first remember [my brother, Jack], dimly as a vociferous disturber of my domestic peace and a rival claimant to my mother's attention: . . . [but] during these first years . . . we laid the foundations of an intimate friendship that was the greatest happiness of my life and lasted unbroken until his death fifty-eight years later.¹

Born in a suburb of Belfast in northern Ireland on the 16th of June 1895, Warren spent his early years in a loving and intellectually stimulating home. His mother, Flora Hamilton Lewis, was intelligent and unusually well-educated for her day, receiving her First Class degree in mathematics from Queen's University, Belfast. His father, Albert, had an exceptionally quick

mind and a skillful tongue which, coupled with his passionate nature, aided him in becoming a successful solicitor (lawyer) in the Belfast courts.

Along with his younger brother Jack, Warnie was first taught at home by his mother and later a governess. These were idyllic years for the two boys; virtually inseparable, they spent the vast majority of their waking hours together, not only learning their lessons, but also in long periods of creative play. Active children, though not athletic, whenever the weather permitted, the brothers were out of doors exploring the beautiful Irish countryside which was just a short bike ride from their home Little Lea. Another favorite childhood activity was their annual month-long seaside holiday, taken with their mother and nursemaid.

When typical rainy Irish weather forced them indoors, the two boys relished these hours as well. Reading filled much of their time, but they also created and illustrated their own stories. Together, they conceived the imaginary world of *Boxen*, which combined Warnie's interest in steamships and trains with Jack's passion for chivalrous knights, along with "dressed animals" in the tradition of Beatrix Potter.

These happy early years were the foundation for the lifelong friendship that meant so much to both brothers. Jack described their relationship this way in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*: "Though three years my senior, [Warnie] never seemed to be an elder brother; we were allies, not to say confederates, from the very first."²

Bright But Lazy Student

In May 1905, shortly before his tenth birthday, Warren was sent by his parents to Wynyard, a small boarding school in Hertfordshire, England. Unfortunately, the choice of school could not have been worse, as it was run by a headmaster who "was an extremely uninspiring teacher—in fact not a teacher at all, but rather a warder who ruled his charges by sheer terror, and saw that the day's useless allotted task was performed

solely by the gusto and dexterity by which he yielded his cane.”³ The misery of enduring this terrible school was compounded by the fact that little learning actually occurred. Years later Warren acknowledged: “It is a significant fact that I cannot remember one single piece of instruction that was imparted to me [during my four years] at Wynyard, and yet, when I first went there, I was neither an idle nor a stupid boy.”⁴

After his dismal years spent foundering at Wynyard, Warren’s next school could not help but shine in contrast. And indeed that was the case, for Warnie quickly grew to love Malvern College and the freedom it offered (in contrast to the constant harassment he had experienced at Wynyard). This freedom did not translate into academic rigor in his studies, however, for the slovenly academic habits that Warren had acquired at his earlier school remained. Thus, though he was very happy at Malvern, Warren left in May 1913 with little scholastic achievement to show for his four years.

As a result, once Warren decided to apply for a career in the army, it became clear that he would need help preparing for the entrance exam to Sandhurst Royal Military Academy. With the assistance of W.T. Kirkpatrick, the tutor who was later to have such a great impact on C.S. Lewis, Warren was able to earn a Prize Cadetship to Sandhurst, placing twenty-first out of 201 successful candidates. As Warren later recalled:

When I went to [study with Kirkpatrick] I had what would now be called ‘an inferiority complex’, partly the result of Wynyard, partly of my own idleness, and partly of the *laissez faire* methods of Malvern. A few weeks of Kirk’s generous but sparing praise of my efforts, and of his pungent criticisms of the Malvern masters restored my long lost self confidence: I saw that whilst I wasn’t not brilliant or even clever, I had in the past been unsuccessful because I was lazy, and not lazy because I was unsuccessful.⁵

Career Soldier

Due to wartime pressures, Warren’s accelerated officer’s training course was only nine months in length instead of the usual two years. On September 30, 1914, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC), and sent to France where he spent most of World War I. Following the end of hostilities, he served in Belgium for a few months, until he was reassigned to England for additional training. During this and subsequent home assignments, Warren’s usual practice was to spend his leaves with his brother Jack, who was then a student at Oxford University, and later a don at Magdalen College, Oxford.

Upon occasion, Warren did return to Belfast to visit his father, Albert, but these visits were almost always ones of obligation, for both Lewis brothers had become increasingly estranged from their father since the death of their beloved mother, Flora, in 1908.⁶

Warren’s responsibilities in the RASC were primarily administrative in nature as he fulfilled various supervisory roles overseeing troop supply needs including, at times, mechanical transport. His later overseas postings included Sierre Leone, West Africa, and two tours of duty in Shanghai, China, where he was stationed when the Japanese attacked in January 1932. Throughout his years in the army (ranging from 1914 until 1932), these overseas tours of duty were interspersed with home assignments at military bases in England.

It was during his first posting in the Far East that Warren received a telegram from his brother, Jack, informing him of their father’s death on the 25th of September 1929. The sad news was totally unexpected, as due to the distance from home and the slowness of sea mail, Warren was not aware that Albert was gravely ill. Alone and grieving, far from his brother, Warnie recorded the following thoughts in his diary:

[My father’s death] is hurting me more than I should ever have imagined it would have done. For one thing, my relations with him on paper have been friendly and intimate ever since I was unexpectedly ordered abroad, and by mere lapse of time I was perhaps more affectionately disposed to him than I would have been had I been in frequent contact with him. . . . I am glad that the last time we spent together was also one of the happiest we ever had – the first week of April 1927 – unclouded by the emotionalism with which he would have spoilt it had he known that I would be half way to China before the month was over. . . . The thought that there will never be any ‘going home’ for me [to the family home in Belfast], is hard to bear. I’d give a lot at this minute for a talk with Jack.⁷

Some months after his father’s death, Warren returned home from Shanghai on leave, during which time he and Jack settled the affairs of their father’s estate, including the sale of the family home in Belfast. By this time, Jack was already established as a don at Oxford University, and making his home with the mother and daughter of an army friend, Paddy Moore, who had died in the war. When Warren’s next assignment was a fortuitous posting to nearby Bulford, he was able to spend many weekend leaves visiting Jack’s new household in Oxford. Eventually, Jack and the Moores invited Warren to permanently make his home with them when he was no longer in

the army. He happily agreed. And so it was that in July 1930, with funds combined from the brothers' inheritance from their father, along with money from Mrs. Moore, this newly formed family unit purchased The Kilns, just outside Oxford. The Kilns, a modest brick home set on eight acres of lovely grounds including woods and a pond, became Warnie's permanent home in December 1932 when he retired with the rank of Captain from the RASC after 18 years of service.⁸

As much as Warnie grew to love his new home at The Kilns, the relationship between Jack and Mrs. Janie King Moore was to cause him great unhappiness. Initially appreciative of the home life Mrs. Moore offered to him and Jack, Warren grew to resent her unceasing demands upon the time and energies of his brother. Jack's commitment to Mrs. Moore was begun with a wartime promise to her son, and he fulfilled it faithfully until her death in 1951. It was an attachment which Warren never did understand or approve, as he reflected later: "The most puzzling to myself and to Jack's friends was Mrs. Moore's extreme unsuitability as a companion for him. She was a woman of very limited mind, and notably domineering and possessive by temperament. She . . . interfered constantly with his work, and imposed upon him a heavy burden of minor domestic tasks. . . . the stress and gloom that it caused him must not be played down."⁹ While Warren's assessment of Mrs. Moore may have been overly harsh, there is no doubt that her controlling nature as well as the long years of her failing health did take a heavy toll on the home life of both Lewis brothers.

In spite of his eventual difficulties with Mrs. Moore, the early days of Warren's retirement were very happy indeed. Though there were the usual annoyances common to any household, Warnie was nonetheless grateful for the many good things which Mrs. Moore and her daughter, Maureen, brought into his life. He was also very glad to be permanently reunited with his beloved brother. But most of all, Warren rejoiced that he was now free from the boredom and restrictions that had begun to prescribe his military life. A year into his retirement, he recorded the following evaluation: "I can say with no reservations whatsoever, that the past twelve months has been incomparably the happiest of my life."¹⁰

Inveterate Reader and Writer

One of Warren's frequent complaints about life in the army had been that it was difficult to find blocks of uninterrupted reading time in the RASC mess. Though not as disciplined in this pursuit as his brother, reading was nonetheless an essential of his daily life. Raised in a home that nurtured his love for books,

whenever possible Warren turned to reading as the preferred way to spend a quiet evening. His reading preferences were eclectic, ranging from the poetry of the *Aeniad* to the humor of P.G. Wodehouse. He devoured mysteries, science fiction, and novels of all sorts. But he also read through an unending supply of history, biography, literary criticism, poetry and drama. Nor did he neglect religious works, as his reading for just one Lenten season illustrates:

I've spent an hour each day in religious reading and during the last six weeks I've read Law's *Serious Call*, Lathom's *Pastor Pastorum*, Jack's *Reflections on the Psalms*, *God in the Dock*, *Screwtape*, and *Letters to Malcolm*, G.K. Chesterton's *Everlasting Man*, and Austin Farrer's *Is There a Science of God* – as well of course as my normal daily Bible reading.¹¹

Warren's love of words led him into another related pursuit – that of writing, itself. He began his retirement with the ambitious task of arranging, selecting and transcribing the many family documents which he and his brother had inherited at their father's death. These materials consisted of family diaries, letters, miscellaneous papers and photographs covering the years from 1850 through 1930. It took Warren several years to compile these excerpts, along with his accompanying notes and commentary, into eleven bound volumes – which he titled as *Memoirs of the Lewis Family*. Never published, this extensive family record has proved invaluable to those interested in the life of C.S. Lewis.¹²

However, long before he began his work on the *Lewis Family Papers*, Warren had already dedicated countless hours to the writing of his own diaries. Consisting of more than a million and a quarter words, the handwritten diaries fill twenty-three volumes and cover a span of over fifty years (1919-1972). In these pages, Warren wrote of his army experiences, as well as of family life in Belfast and his retirement years at The Kilns. There are records of his walking tours with Jack, conversations with friends, mentions of books he has read and places he has visited, as well as his astute reflections on numerous subjects of all sorts and categories.

Warren's literary and historical curiosity extended to other areas as well. In 1919, his reading of St. Simon's diaries awakened his interest in 17th century France. As he continued to read further in this historical period, his fascination deepened and during retirement he began composing his own popular histories. Warren's first published book, *The Splendid Century: Some Aspects of French Life in the Reign of Louis XIV*, was issued in 1953. It was followed by six other titles on

17th century France: *The Sunset of the Splendid Century: The Life and Times of Louis Auguste de Bourbon, Duc de Maine, 1670-1736* (1955); *Assault on Olympus: The Rise of the House of Gramont between 1604 and 1678* (1958); *Louis XIV: An Informal Portrait* (1959); *The Scandalous Regent: A Life of Philippe, Duc d'Orleans, 1674-1723, and of his family* (1961); *Levantine Adventurer: The Travels and Missions of the Chevalier d'Arvieuz, 1653-1697* (1962); *Memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon* (1964).

Though not works of extensive original research, his elegantly written histories of 17th and 18th century France were nonetheless well-regarded by reviewers. Described as delightful and witty, his seven books demonstrate his insight into human nature as well as his observant eye for details – literary traits which also characterize his own diaries. Following C.S. Lewis's death in 1963, Warren wrote a biographical volume on his brother which consisted primarily of collected letters. This unpublished work was extensively edited and eventually published as *Letters of C.S. Lewis*.¹³

In addition to his own writing and editing, once he had retired from the army, Warnie also began to serve as his brother's secretary – typing the answers to all of Jack's non-personal correspondence. Because of the vast quantity of letters which came to C.S. Lewis in response to both his books and BBC radio broadcasts, the help which Warren provided in this way was extremely significant. (Warren later estimated that he had typed at least twelve thousand letters for his brother.)

Steadfast Friend and "Perfect" Gentleman

In spite of Warren's reserved character, he was a personable and well-liked friend to many. First and foremost, of course, there was his friendship with his brother Jack which has already been described in some detail. Because of the closeness of their relationship, it is not surprising that in later life most of Warnie's friends were also friends of Jack's.¹⁴ In particular, this included those men who were members of the Inklings – a group of friends who gathered together weekly in Jack's Magdalen College rooms for an evening of vigorous conversation that inevitably revolved around literary topics. In addition to the two Lewis brothers, members of the Inklings included: J.R.R. Tolkien and his son Christopher, Robert Havard, Owen Barfield, Hugo Dyson, Colin Hardie, Charles Williams, and many other academic friends.¹⁵ Most of the Inklings were writers, themselves, and as a result, one favorite aspect of these gatherings often included readings from their various works in progress, accompanied by extempore criticism – both favorable and not.

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote this description of one meeting to his son Christopher (who also attended the Inklings meetings when he was in Oxford):

C.S.L. [Jack] was highly flown, but we were also in good fettle. . . . The result was a most amusing and highly contentious evening, on which (had an outsider eavesdropped) he would have thought it a meeting of fell enemies hurling deadly insults before drawing their guns. Warnie was in excellent majoral form. On one occasion when the audience had flatly refused to hear Jack discourse on and define 'Chance', Jack said: 'Very well, some other time, but if you die tonight you'll be cut off knowing a great deal less about Chance you might have.' Warnie: 'That only goes to illustrate what I've always said: every cloud has a silver lining.'¹⁶

Not only does this brief description give a wonderful glimpse into the joviality and intellectual repartee which was the core of the Inklings, but it also demonstrates the wit of Warren Lewis – an aspect of Warnie's personality which has often been overlooked.

Indeed, apart from Jack (and certain members of The Kilns household), it was the Inklings friends who saw the reserved Warren at his unguarded best. And as such, their perception of Warnie is worth noting. While his brother Jack was clearly the dynamic center of the gatherings, Warren was nonetheless a popular and significant contributor to the wide-ranging conversations and intellectual debate. But he also played an important part in the group by often serving on behalf of his brother as a welcoming host. It was a role which Warnie filled naturally and humbly. As John Wain, one of his fellow Inklings observed: "W.H. Lewis, [was] a man who stays in my memory as the most courteous I have ever met – not with mere politeness, but with a genial, self-forgetful considerateness that was as instinctive to him as breathing."¹⁷

This sense of Warnie as a true, instinctive gentleman who treated others with genuine courtesy and respect is echoed by his step-nephew, Douglas Gresham, who recorded that

Warnie, a gentleman in all the finest senses of the word, was liked throughout the neighborhood, which, when I arrived, was made up chiefly of the homes of people who worked at the nearby motorcar factories at Cowley. 'The Major' was a well known and respected figure; always accorded a civil 'Mornin', Major' or 'Arternoon, Major' as he passed by on his regular walks down to Magdalen to work, study or read with Jack in his college rooms during term time.¹⁸

A Christian Who Struggled and Yet Persevered

Raised in a Christian home, Warren was baptized and confirmed in the Anglican church in Belfast where his grandfather was rector. In spite of this early foundation, however, Warnie felt little attraction to the faith, and his church-going gradually became more a matter of family tradition than of personal conviction. To be sure, there were moments when he experienced a sense of the transcendent—particularly when as a child he encountered beauty in the natural world—but to a large extent he lived his early years without regard to any spiritual reality. However, in March 1930, while returning from a tour of duty in China, Warren stopped off for a visit to the Buddhist shrine at Kamakura, Japan. Standing before a huge statue of the Dibutsu Buddha, Warren had a profound spiritual encounter, one which reawakened his sense that there was more to life than the material world surrounding him.

It was apparent that God was steadily working on his heart and mind, and in his diary entry of May 9, 1931, Warren recorded:

I started to say my prayers again after having discontinued doing so for more years than I care to remember: this was no sudden impulse but the result of a conviction of the truth of Christianity which has been growing on me for a considerable time: a conviction for which I admit I should be hard put to find a logical proof, but which rests on the inherent improbability of the whole of existence being fortuitous, and the inability of the materialists to provide any convincing explanation of the origin of life. I feel happier for my return to the practice which is a fact that material explanation will cover. When I have prepared myself a little further, I intend to go to Communion once again. So with me, the wheel has now made the full revolution—indifference, skepticism, atheism, agnosticism, and back again to Christianity.¹⁹

Hints of Warren's spiritual development are scattered throughout his diaries, but unlike the very public expression of his brother's faith, Warnie's Christian belief remained a quiet essential of his life. Over time, he developed a practice of daily prayer and Bible Study, and upon retirement, he was a regular congregant at their neighborhood Anglican church (even serving for a time as churchwarden). His diary also demonstrates the way in which his Christian faith informed his daily actions and struggles. There are frequent expressions of gratitude to God for simple pleasures, and an occasional recognition of the transcendent:

Seeing a birch tree with its russet leaves in the bright sunlight, I got that feeling—or rather *vision* that comes like a flash of lightening, and leaves a confused feeling that this is only a pale shadow of some unimaginable beauty which either one used to know, or which is just round some invisible corner. I accept it with deep thankfulness whenever it comes as a promise of immortality.²⁰

In numerous places, Warren also records his deep desire for God's help in facing the ongoing challenges of life. Among the most severe of these trials was his longtime battle with alcoholism. The addictive attraction of drink was an unfortunate byproduct of his years in the army, when alcohol became his preferred means of coping with stress and boredom. In his younger days, drinking was a crutch which he handled without too much apparent difficulty, but as time went on, the addiction became more destructive. A sensitive and gentle man by nature, Warnie was also subject to bouts of serious depression, which in turn were exacerbated by the affects of alcohol. Thus, in later years, when he sunk into depression—caused often by his reaction to the stressful and unhappy atmosphere in The Kilns as Mrs. Moore's mental health deteriorated—he succumbed to intense drinking binges which caused him and those around him, most especially his brother, great pain.

Warren struggled valiantly to overcome this addiction without the benefit of understanding it as a disease rather than a character flaw. There were months, sometimes years, of hard won success followed by a brief relapse—and then the struggle would begin once again. The severest test to his resolve came with the death of his brother in 1963. The ten years following Jack's death were lonely ones for Warren, filled at times with periods of anxiety and depression. But with God's help, he continued his courageous struggle against turning to the comforts of alcohol, and succeeded more often than not. After a period of declining health and a final visit to his beloved Ireland, Warren Lewis returned to The Kilns where he died peacefully at home on April 9, 1973. He was nearly 78.

- 1 Warren H. Lewis, "Memoir of C.S. Lewis" in *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd., 1966), p. 1.
- 2 C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 13.
- 3 Warren H. Lewis, *Lewis Family Papers*, vol. III, (1933), bound typescript in the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, pp. 39-40.
- 4 Warren H. Lewis, *Lewis Family Papers*, vol. III, p. 40.
- 5 Warren H. Lewis, *Lewis Family Papers*, vol. IV, (1933), p. 62.
- 6 For more on the death of Flora Lewis, see C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, pp. 24-27.
- 7 Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends*, ed. by Clyde S. Kilby and Marjorie Lamp Mead, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 16.

- 8 When World War II erupted, Warren was recalled to active service and given the provisional rank of Major. He was transferred to the Reserve of Officers in Oxford in August 1941, after being evacuated along with his unit from Dunkirk.
- 9 Warren H. Lewis, "Memoir of C.S. Lewis" in *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, pp. 12-13.
- 10 Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends*, p. 129.
- 11 Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends*, p. 299.
- 12 At his death, Warren willed the *Lewis Family Papers* to the Wade Center at Wheaton College, where they are available for use by researchers.
- 13 The earlier unpublished and unedited biography written by Warren was also willed by him to the Wade Center at Wheaton College, and is available for use by researchers.
- 14 Warren did stay in touch with one close friend from his army days, Major H.D. Parkin – a friendship that spanned almost thirty years, until Parkin's death in 1958. Though there is not space in this brief biographical sketch to include her, another close friend worth noting was C.S. Lewis's wife, Joy. For more on Warren's relationship with his sister-in-law, see *Brothers and Friends*, pp. 244-251.
- 15 For more on the Inklings, see *The Inklings* by Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), *C.S. Lewis: Companion and Guide* by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), and also the forthcoming book, *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community* by Diana Glyer (Kent State UP, 2006).
- 16 Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien, ed. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), p. 103.
- 17 John Wain, *Sprightly Running* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1962), p. 184.
- 18 Douglas Gresham, *Lenten Lands* (San Francisco: HarperSanFran, 1988), p. 42.
- 19 Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends*, p. 80.
- 20 Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends*, p. 213.



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